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Buck Island— Underwater Jewel

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JERRY AND IDAZ GREENBERG

IN A TURKOISE WORLD of sunlight and shadow, we swim through a multicolored garden: clusters of golden ethereal coral with intricate tall as a man, towering sea fans and feathers swaying in the current, and giant heads of convoluted brain coral. We are exploring a skin-silver's paradise, the fascinating underwater trail of Buck Island Reef National Monument in the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Following a series of submerged markers that point the way, we flinger through seas richly warm and so clear that we can see 100 feet ahead. Everywhere we roam in this coral city, brilliant tropical fish keep us company: yellowtail snappers, blue tangs, French angels, Atlantic spadefish, striped parrotfish, variculated parrotfish, and four-eye butterflyfish named for markings that resemble extra eyes. Tiny fish, and four-eye damselfish nip our flippers; feet if we come too near their territorial nook. Occasionally we spy an ill-tempered spotted moray eel lurking under a ledge to wait for a juicy lobster.

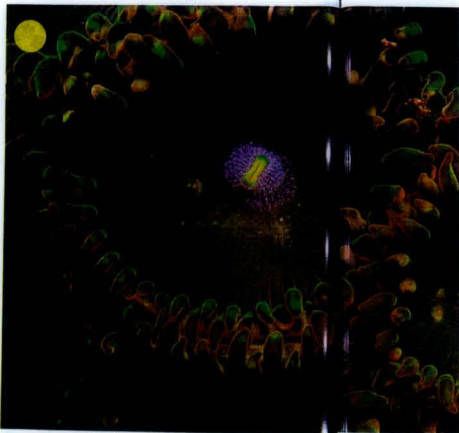
I've been an underwater photographer for more than 20 years. My wife Idaz and our children Susy, 14, Mike, 12, and Mind, 10, have logged countless hours diving in Florida waters. Yet as we glide just outcrop above with silencing coral and above twisting alloys carpeted with white sand, we are dazzled by this shimmering playground. We move with little or no fear of sharks or barracudas. Buck Island has never known an attack. With numerous shallow spots and deeper sections of 25 to 28 feet, the reef is a favorite training ground for novice snorkelers.

Even after hours of plumbing the maze of this Caribbean realm, the swimmers plead to stay a few more minutes. Only one rallying cry—"Lunch!"—bars them shoreward across sandy shallows (below).

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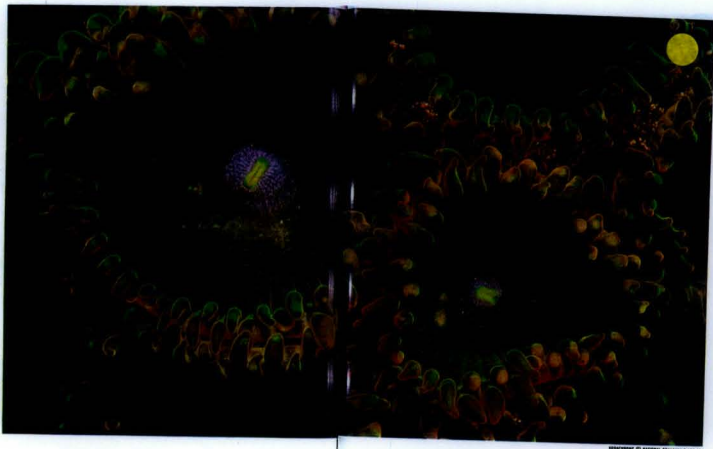


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Submarine showpiece of Buck Island Reef shelters an amazing variety of life, including sea anemones, endangered sea turtles. Like their coral relatives, they are polyps, with a mouth opening and tentacles that trap food.

Miniature barrier reef almost rings horseshoed Buck Island (right), a mile and a half off the northeast coast of St. Croix. Visitor reach is absent West Indian ships piloted by local skippers.



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Miniature barrier reef almost rings horseshoed Buck Island (right), a mile and a half off the northeast coast of St. Croix. Visitor reach is absent West Indian ships piloted by local skippers.



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IMANTASTIC CORAL FORESTS reach toward the light on Back Island Reef. Flipping above a giant brain coral encrusted by siltbers, Sisy feasts her eyes on the reef's living colors of green and gold.

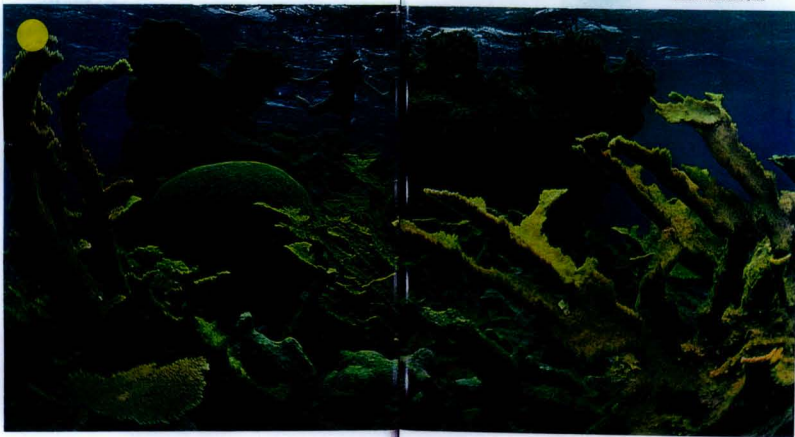
This underwater metropolis is the patient work of billions of tiny creatures. Each coral polyp divides into two or three of its kind, thus perpetuating a chain of survival centuries old. The outer layers grow atop a mass of limestone caused by the skeletal re-

mains of generations of an asexual polyp. Live polyps contain hundreds of microscopic plants in a mutually beneficial partnership. The coral produces carbon dioxide and other wastes useful to the plants; the plants provide the polyps with oxygen in a convenient arrangement called symbiosis, from Greek words meaning "living together."

To learn more about coral reefs, see this article on Florida's John Pennekamp Key Reef State Park by the author, and "Islands: 15 Islands in the January 1975 GLOBEVIEW."

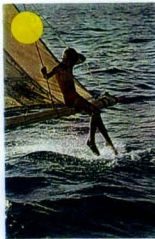


PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY WATKINS FOR GLOBEVIEW



DRYE RIVER on junglelike brush is where a sudden rafting stops our family as we climb to the 330-foot crest of Back Island. Then a land-rub scurry across our path. Bannanquits and warblers fill overhead, and an emerald-throated hummingbird probes brilliant blossoms. We follow a cracker-studded trail past acacia and poisonous manchineel trees, whose milky sap can burn the skin like lye. Mike likens the tortured branches of turpentine trees to "portacups in knots."

On our daily run to St. Croix Island, Mike rides the boom (lower left), setting a cool



dunking in each wave. Mimi likes to believe that our vessel was once a pirate ship, and our skipper says nothing to disabuse her. All of us taste the thrill of lying back against the canvas as we ride the trade winds.

Adding to the fun, tour-boat captains engage in good-natured races on the morning run to Back Island and on the evening return. Blowing ranch horns when passing one another, they exchange tart advice, "Hey, man, put out to catch me wind for go-oid!"

On the clearest days we strap our tanks of compressed air for a leisurely hour of movie-making on

the underwater trail. Aiming a super-eight camera, Mike frames a yellow-tail snapper drifting above a trail marker. Sisy and Mimi like to feed the fish and try to pet them. They watch helmet shells and starfish gliding across the reef and see a parrotfish nibble a stack of coral. Then our hour of magic is spent, and we are back aboard; the girls in excited torrents talk about what they saw, and Mike eager to identify an unfamiliar fish he spotted. If only he can swim Back Island's underwater trail often enough, he's sure he'll discover a new species someday.

